



California NGA Policy Academy Team

Youth Transitioning Out of Foster Care

California was one of six states chosen to participate in the National Governor's Association (NGA) Policy Academy on Youth Transitioning Out of Foster Care. The Academy, which began in June 2006, provided a unique opportunity for teams of state leaders to work with national and state experts, to improve outcomes for youth transitioning from foster care to adulthood.

The Issue

The transition to adulthood and economic independence can be challenging for any adolescent and generally occurs over many years and with substantial support from family and friends. In fact, about half of youth ages 18-24 in the United States live at home and nearly two-thirds of young adults in their early 20's receive economic support from their parents. In contrast, most youth in foster care "age out" of the system when they turn 18, often with only minimal preparation and without ongoing supports that would help them become happy, productive adults.

California has approximately 26,000 foster children 16 years and older. Once emancipated from the system, these youth will face daunting odds. Research has shown that over half of foster youth drop out of high school, 25% become homeless, nearly 60% are unemployed, many suffer from post-traumatic stress disorder and too many leave the system without any connection to an adult, family or community.

In recent years, California's public and private agencies have made great strides in improving services and outcomes for our transitioning foster youth. An impressive collection of innovative and promising approaches has emerged at both state and county levels indicating California's readiness to help foster youth successfully transition. Yet many of these initiatives currently reach only a small portion of transition-aged foster youth, and challenges to integration and statewide implementation remain.

California's NGA Policy Academy Goals

Under the leadership of the California Department of Social Services, the NGA California team brought together county and state leaders from multiple public systems—child welfare, mental health, employment, education, corrections—as well as private providers, philanthropy, youth and advocates. Three fundamental goals for transition aged youth were identified:

Permanence—Every youth will have lifelong connections with family and supportive adults.

Education—Every youth will have a quality education, a high school diploma and support in pursuing post-secondary opportunities.

Employment—Every youth will have work experience and training opportunities that will prepare them for and place them in living wage employment and careers.

California's NGA Policy Academy Recommendations

Through an inclusive inter-disciplinary process focused on addressing the challenges faced by transition aged foster youth, the Policy Academy provided an opportunity to assess current efforts in California, make recommendations and implement change to systematically address key challenges and improve transition outcomes. This process resulted in a set of recommendations that will be released in the spring of 2008. Central to these recommendations is a new vision for California's Independent Living Program—a vision of cross-system integration and service delivery able to meet the individual needs of each youth. Progress to date on the recommendations has included a statewide foster youth career development and employment summit held in January 2008, NGA team education recommendations integrated into the work of the California Foster Youth Education Task Force, and planning for a Breakthrough Series Collaborative ("BSC") to help counties in California put the new Independent Living Program vision into action.